

**MIGRATION AND MULTICULTURALISM  
CREATIVE OPPORTUNITIES FOR IRELAND:  
AN IMMIGRANT VIEWPOINT<sup>1</sup>**

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In a society like Ireland where globalisation and interdependency have combined to produce continued economic success and increased diversity of people, the question of a cultural mix has remained controversial. Many Irish people, who are baffled at the way Ireland has changed within a few years from a nation of emigration to nation of immigration, always say that they did not ask for it. Often you hear comments from some Irish people, like “we were not consulted” or “no one asked us if we wanted them,” as if nature can be cheated.

**Challenges of Inclusion – Ireland and immigrants:**

There is no doubt that immigration to Ireland is a new phenomenon. But unlike millions of Irish people forced to leave the shores of Ireland because of famine and starvation, many immigrants to Ireland, at the turn of the Celtic Tiger, were invited here to rescue the economy from sinking. A report, “Voices of Immigrants: The Challenges of Inclusion” observed,

As the Irish economy grew in the 1990s, Ireland was one of the last EU countries to reach its migration turning point, which it did in 1996. At this time, Ireland moved from being a country of emigration to becoming a country of immigration, where immigration was encouraged to fill skill

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shortages.<sup>3</sup>

One of the methods used by Ireland to actively attract workers was by showcasing its great jobs potential through advertising campaigns and job fairs held in some foreign countries by FAS, the Department of Trade, Enterprise and Employment and other groups. From a trickle, the number of migrant workers gradually increased. Although the campaign targeted a specific set of people, within a short time news of Ireland's employment opportunities spread far and wide. The State began to experience different types of inward movement, not least asylum seekers and students. That development culminated in Ireland being currently host to nationals from over 190 countries.

The dominant Irish culture, the long established cultures of the Travelling people, the Jewish community, and those different traditions and cultures brought by men and women who arrived in Ireland seeking a better future, represent the birth of the current Irish multiculturalism. This means the existence of new people, new lifestyles, new languages and new cultures alongside an existing dominant society. In short, as Keith Spiller believes,

The recognition of asylum seekers, refugees, immigrants and other nationalities born in Ireland is directing Ireland towards its first acknowledgements of the country becoming a multicultural society. Indeed people like Samantha Mumba with her Dublin accent or Sean Og O'Halpin with his All-Ireland medals, are shifting the stereotypical image of what makes an Irish woman and man.<sup>4</sup>

However, unlike the USA, England, Sweden, South Africa and Canada, which have witnessed long term immigration, the Irish version of multiculturalism, though still evolving, is seen as a negative development by many Irish people. Also, there has not

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<sup>3</sup> Patricia Kelleher and Carmel Kelleher, *Voices of Immigrants : the challenges of inclusion*, ed. Orla Parkinson, Dublin, Immigrant Council of Ireland, 2004, ix.

<sup>4</sup> Keith Spiller, <http://www.ucc.ie/ucc/depts/geography/stafhome/denis/spiller.htm>

been an honest and rational debate on multiculturalism. Currently discussion about the issue has mainly revolved around asylum seekers and racism and it is in no small way contributing to halting the positive development of multiculturalism. Many people are failing to understand that the same “mix of colours and cultures that gives such exuberance to New York and London,<sup>5</sup>” which we all celebrate on trips to such countries, is what many people currently resent here.

Evidence of this resentment abounds. At the eve of the 2004 Cabinet reshuffle Gay Mitchell, TD, Foreign Affairs Spokesperson for Fine Gael – a party that has not itself been proactive in encouraging cross-cultural understanding and cooperation in Ireland – called for the appointment of a Minister of State to coordinate immigrant affairs across all Departments. Although he scored a cheap political point by saying it, his statement nevertheless describes the situation very well:

This Minister could proactively combat racism, ensure that the health, education and other needs of immigrants are addressed and promote integration policies. This would mean having programmes in place to educate both the indigenous and immigrant population on the dangers of racism.

A significant number of people, when they do not receive what they consider are their entitlements, complain to TDs that they would get them 'if they were immigrants'. Most do not distinguish between bogus asylum seekers and real asylum seekers or other immigrants. This bad feeling, if it is allowed to fester, will eventually give rise to conflict and possibly violence.<sup>6</sup>

Such bad feelings emanate from lack of proper programmes and

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<sup>5</sup> *The Economist* “Opening the Door”, 2 November, 2002. 11

<sup>6</sup> “Mitchell calls for Immigrant Affairs Minister to be appointed in reshuffle,” Fine Gael Foreign Affairs Spokesperson Gay Mitchell TD, Monday, 27 September 2004. [www.finegael.ie](http://www.finegael.ie)

policies to promote multiculturalism in Ireland. To put it in a different way, it is political or rather Government inaction that has bedevilled real progress being made in creating a multicultural society. This issue will be discussed in detail later.

**Progress towards multiculturalism:**

Like many people who have lived through the changes in Ireland within the last decade, I would say that some progress has been made; though it could be better. As Councillor Rotimi Adebari – one of the two Africans elected in the 2004 local election told me recently:

We are not doing too badly. We are getting there. If a country that became multicultural not quite 10 years ago can elect two (Black) people this year to the local council then you can say that progress has been made especially in the local level.<sup>7</sup>

Of course that can be said to be real progress if one considers the fact that only one notable immigrant politician – with no Irish ancestry, Dr Bhamji had previously been elected to public office (the Dail) – in the history of the State. Also if you compare the Irish situation with the history of multiculturalism in the USA or UK, only God knows how long it took those countries to make such political progress.

The implication of this is that many Irish people are receptive to immigrants in Ireland. Apart from the two new Independent Councillors – Rotimi Adebari representing Portlaoise Town Council and Dr Matthew Taiwo representing Ennis Town Council – a few other immigrant candidates who contested the local election, though not elected, made their marks.

I am not saying that the candidates were handed the elections on a golden platter. No! They fought for it and also had to contend with very many problems including racism. Whatever level of

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<sup>7</sup> Interview with Councillor Rotimi Adebari.

discrimination they faced during that election, the good news is the rejection at the polls of a few Irish candidates who, flying the race card, sought council seats and election into the European parliament. Fortunately, voters also rejected the Immigration Control Platform candidates in the last general election. This has not been the case in most EU countries where “Racism shows us new faces: the far right gains more and more power through elections, neo-nazis are not just unorganised groups of skinheads anymore, but ‘respectable’ persons dressed in suits; racism is present in pop culture and in sports.”<sup>8</sup>

Many immigrants to Ireland have also been received locally with mixed feelings. Where multiculturalism only has to do with food and music, the message of cross-cultural understanding and cooperation has been very well received, maybe because they know no boundaries. When you compare this with Sweden I would like to say that Ireland is gradually forging ahead. Swedes are colder than the Irish in spite of the laudable Swedish integration policies and programmes that encourage diversity. In January 2003 I had the opportunity to visit some migrant-led organisations in Sweden. I was surprised to hear that multicultural events, which are synonymous with bringing communities together in divergent societies, are hardly attended by Swedes. Having said this, it is important to stress here that there has not been enough contact established between minority ethnic groups and the larger Irish society. Apart from children, especially those involved in sports, both new and old communities are not socialising enough and community spirit is not being formed. As I mentioned earlier, the Government is hugely to blame for this.

### **Government not doing Enough to encourage diversity:**

Institutional racism, according to Bryan Fanning, is “a term which describes the way Black and ethnic and minorities suffer from discrimination when racism within society becomes reflected in

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<sup>8</sup> United Conference Paper: *Facing the Challenge: A Youth Strategy Against Racism and Related Forms of Discrimination in Europe*. October 9-13, 2002, Bucharest, Romania.

organisations and institutions”. “Discrimination may result from the inability of, or unwillingness of, organisations and institutions to take into account societal diversity in the provision of services.”<sup>9</sup>

There have been cases of this. The National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism, in its Six-Monthly Racist Incidents Reports for the period November 2003 to April 2004, said that “A Romanian woman with a disability was asked for her ticket on board a train. When she produced her free travel pass the rail worker refused to believe that the pass belonged to her and subsequently removed it from her. The woman was very upset and was forced to apply for a replacement card.” The report also tells of an Irish Muslim who was asked to change her photograph because she was wearing a headscarf when she applied for a new Irish passport.<sup>10</sup>

Continued Government denial of the existence of racism in society is also having a negative impact in the acceptance of diversity. In 2001, at the World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination and Xenophobia, the former Minister for Justice John O’Donoghue (now Minister for Arts) said that Ireland will deal with racism when it occurs. It seems that being in denial is the norm for the Department of Justice. In a recent interview with the current Minister for Justice, Michael McDowell, he said: “Ireland is not racist.” Minister McDowell in 2003 cut the Know Racism budget because he believed “that there was nothing to fund.” And that the anti-racism campaign was coming to an end.<sup>11</sup> At that time racism was, and is still, a major concern to many immigrants in Ireland. Racist attacks are on the rise and ethnic minority-led organisations are begging for funding to execute anti-racism initiatives. Given that he cut the anti-racism budget, how can racism be properly combated?

Many members of ethnic minorities do not feel confident

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<sup>9</sup> Bryan Fanning, *Racism and Social Change in the Republic of Ireland*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002, 180.

<sup>10</sup> The National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism. <http://www.nccri.ie/pdf/RacistIncidentsNov-Apr04.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Metro Eireann, July 2004. “McDowell: ‘Ireland not racist’”

going to the gardai (police) to report crimes (including racist incidents) either against them or against other members of society. Gardai need to recruit ethnic minorities into the force. Such a move is highly likely to engender trust and confidence in multicultural policing which is currently lacking.

I am not saying that all anti-racism campaigns work or that a friendly garda face is enough in enhancing cross-cultural understanding. As Anastasia Crickley emphasised:

We do not believe either that addressing racism or being clear about what we are against is enough in itself...There is another urgent parallel struggle, not a new one, but one which now more than ever needs debate, discourse and decisions, towards fashioning our inclusive intercultural Europe of the future.”<sup>12</sup>

Therefore, in talking about making real progress towards creating a multicultural society, a number of immigration issues will need to be properly resolved. As of July 2004, over 8,130 applications for citizenship are currently awaiting completion. Of these, more than 6,963 applications are for naturalisation while over 1,167 are declarations of post-nuptial citizenship and include applications “received in the period 1999 to date,” according to a Department of Justice spokesperson. The Justice Department does not know when these applications will be looked into. The Minister said the problem is to do with staffing – that 420 staff out of nearly 650 public servants in the Department are presently involved with the asylum issue. Should this set of people, many of whom have contributed enormously to the growth and development of this country over the years, be continuously made to wait endlessly?<sup>13</sup>

There have been a series of calls from several sectors of the country for the Government to regularise the situation of asylum seekers who either have Irish children or are legally working. The

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<sup>12</sup> Metro Eireann, July 2004 “Anti-racism ‘is not enough’”

<sup>13</sup> Metro Eireann, August 2004, “Naturalisation linked to jobs”

Government response has been that there will not be a general amnesty and that cases will be handled individually. However, to continuously allow several thousands of people to remain in limbo does not augur well for multiethnic Ireland. Many of these people are able-bodied and ready to work, but are not allowed to do so. As such, they are being forced to remain on social welfare and be seen as good-for-nothings by many Irish people.

In 1999, a number of asylum seekers got permission to work. At present, many of them still await decisions largely on their application for humanitarian leave to remain in the State. Because they have no residence permit, some of them who have been able to raise deposits for their mortgages are being denied mortgages because they have no confirmed residency status. Even some non-Irish nationals who are legally resident are being refused mortgages either because they are not citizens or because they only have a one-year residency stamp.

The current deportation of asylum seekers (many of whom have Irish children) should also be handled sensitively and sensibly. In June 2004, when the Citizenship Referendum was held to decide whether children born in Ireland should continue to get automatic citizenship, 80 per cent voted not to make citizenship automatic by birth. I truly respect that decision. However, the result of the referendum runs against the belief of the European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance, which said that the granting of citizenship automatically to any child born in the State “may play a positive role in facilitating the integration of the immigrant population...” Minister of Justice Michael McDowell does not agree. He thinks that “the rest of Europe doesn’t believe it either. And 80 per cent of Irish people don’t believe in it either.”<sup>14</sup> It begs an answer; for how can we build a multiethnic society when we forcefully remove Irish children who were born before June 11 2004 by deporting their parents and asking them to either go with or leave their children behind?

Former Labour Party leader Ruairi Quinn, TD, argued before

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<sup>14</sup> Metro Eireann, August 2004. “I don’t believe in a homogenous society”



the presentation of the 2004 Irish Nationality and Citizenship Bill to the Dail,

In the interests of these families and their children, I believe they should, subject of course to basic security checks, be permitted to remain. The breaking up of the families of young children is too high a price to pay simply in order to safeguard the orderly administration of our immigration system. We should take this opportunity to regularise the status of the relatively small number of people who are living here at present in a legal limbo.<sup>15</sup>

The lack of Government provision of adequate programmes and policies and continued lip service to multiethnic Ireland by politicians have made it possible for certain sections of the Irish media to continue to sweep up sentiments against ethnic minorities and also question the need for multiculturalism, thereby making multicultural Ireland more rhetoric than substance.

### **Negative Media Portrayal of Ethnic Minorities:**

Many media in Ireland are deepening 'the colour line.' We have an appalling media portrayal of most ethnic minorities in Ireland, especially asylum seekers and refugees. It is not unusual for the group to complain about one headline/article or the other at different seminars and conferences on racism and equality. In 2002, there was an outcry over the Irish Daily Mirror headline on the front page, "Free Cars For Refugees"<sup>16</sup>. The story is certainly untrue. I have not seen any country that has ever given free cars to anyone, talk less of cars for refugees, irrespective of whatever economic windfall that may be available in such a State. Racist sentiments are also being fuelled by the use of words such as 'floods' and 'soft touch'. There is therefore little doubt as to why

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<sup>15</sup> Citizenship Bill will not justify mass deportations policy of McDowell Statement by Ruairi Quinn TD, Wednesday 29 September, 2004. Source: [www.labour.ie/press/listing/20040929123255.html](http://www.labour.ie/press/listing/20040929123255.html)

<sup>16</sup> Monday September 16.

ethnic minorities and proponents of multiculturalism accuse some Irish media of being grossly irresponsible in promoting hatred and misrepresentation of non-Irish people who are struggling to survive here. Katrina Goldstone argues:

Travellers and black people are equally misrepresented and negatively portrayed in the Irish media. In particular also various codes and code terms have evolved in the Irish media which are no more than a form of racist shorthand.<sup>17</sup>

It is in this regard that Van Dijk “concluded that the press in Europe plays a central role in maintaining (and sometimes aggravating) the 'ethnic status quo,' if not in the reproduction of racism”.<sup>18</sup> The implication is that if the media is giving a negative view about people subconsciously, the people reading it are going to have a negative view about those people, including multiculturalism represented in the media.<sup>19</sup>

In his book “Media Control: The Spectacular Achievements of Propaganda,” Noam Chomsky questions the usefulness of the media in a democratic society. He states, “The role of the media in contemporary politics forces us to ask: What kind of a world and what kind of a society we want to live in, and in particular, in what sense of democracy do we want this to be a democratic society?”<sup>20</sup> For instance, the media have not been able to fully communicate the interests of immigrants to politicians. Also, as local elections come up, reports about possible immigrant involvement have failed to inform the society why they would want to get involved in Irish politics. This is why Chomsky’s question, judging by the nature of

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<sup>17</sup> Katrina Goldstone in Chinedu Onyejelem, *How Black People Feel About Media Representation*. MPhil in Ethnic and Racial Studies Department of Sociology, University of Dublin, Trinity College. October 2003.

<sup>18</sup> Van Dijk ([www.discourse-in-society.org/beliar-e.htm](http://www.discourse-in-society.org/beliar-e.htm))

<sup>19</sup> Chinedu Onyejelem, *How Black People Feel About Media Representation*. MPhil in Ethnic and Racial Studies Department of Sociology, University of Dublin, Trinity College. October 2003.

<sup>20</sup> Noam Chomsky, *Media Control: The Spectacular Achievement of Propaganda*, New York: Seven Stories Press. 2002.

modern media and especially its agenda setting role, will never go away. What the Irish media should rather be doing in its agenda-setting role is communicating balanced ideas about ethnic groups in Ireland.

A good example of how the mainstream media organisations can proactively encourage multiculturalism is by employing ethnic media workers, several of whom are currently unemployed. Radio is particularly strong in creating and supporting a multiethnic society. This is why it is regrettable that the much-awaited ethnic radio station advertised by the Broadcasting Commission of Ireland, BCI, failed to materialise. On the closing date for receipt of applications on 9 July 2004, two applications Failte FM and Global94.9fm, had been submitted, but none were deemed to be suitable. The BCI can still help by recognising evolving multiculturalism in Ireland and boost ethnic minorities' presence on screen and behind the scenes by making it a condition of every licensed visual media that ethnic minorities be adequately represented.

### **Contributions of Ethnic Minorities to Diversity:**

Members of the ethnic minorities do have their own contribution to make if diversity is to be strongly valued and celebrated. I am against the call in the past for minorities to show loyalty to Ireland so that life will be better for them. As an American journalist and lecturer Harry Browne said in defence of immigrants: No 'loyalty' should be required of them. According to him, "In Ireland, as in America, the notion that there is some stable, pre-existing "host culture", to which immigrants owe respect and loyalty, is simply a form of mythology. Migration, as Irish people know all too well, is part of the dynamic of an ever-changing world. "Ireland" is already defined partly by what its latest immigrants make of it."<sup>21</sup> I totally agree with him. There are rules and regulations that govern lives in Ireland and ethnic minorities need to obey the law, which is the main institution of the State.

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<sup>21</sup> Harry Browne, *Metro Eireann*, October 2002.